SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN

Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East

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MAPS

The Midde East
Taken from: http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/profile/mideastr.pdf

Iran
Taken from: http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/profile/iran.pdf

Saudi Arabia
Taken from: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html

INTRODUCTION

On 11 October 2011, Eric Holder, the US Attorney General, accused Iran of attempting to assassinate the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the United States. In a somewhat brazen attempt, the scheme involved an Iranian-American used-car salesman with alleged family ties to senior military personnel in Iran, hiring assassins from a Mexican drug cartel at a cost of $1.5 million. The assassins ultimately proved to be agents of the US Drug Enforcement Agency, who were able to foil the plot. Holder alleged that the assassination attempt was "directed and approved by elements of the Iranian government and, specifically, senior members of the Quds Force",[1] the wing of the elite Iranian Republican Guard Corps tasked with action abroad. This event was yet another incident in an increasingly complicated rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Four years earlier, the President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, landed in Riyadh to attend the third Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) summit. The same year, Ahmadinejad also received an invitation to attend the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) meeting in Doha, the first time an Iranian president had received such an invitation. These meetings reflected a thawing in hostilities that had occurred in the preceeding years. During the GCC meeting, Ahmadinejad made reference to Iranian desires for regional security, free from external actors. Upon leaving, Ahmadinejad stated that it "seems that a new chapter of cooperation has been opened in the Persian Gulf".[2] Ahmadinejad was two years into his first term in office,

having succeeded the more reform-minded Mohammad Khatami in 2005. Across the region, states hoped that the new president of Iran would build upon the work of Khatami, leading to an increase in positive relations across the Gulf. Unfortunately, this proved not to be the case.

Ahmadinejad's rise to power from Mayor of Tehran heralded a change in Iran's position within the region, becoming more assertive in foreign policy calculations. Ahmadinejad combined the Shi'i identity of the revolution with a strong sense of Persian nationalism, and under his leadership, Iran assumed a more prominent role within the regional security environment. This assertive foreign policy coupled an alleged nuclear weapons programme with the provision of support for groups such as Hizballah in Lebanon, the Assad regime in Syria, and Shi'i groups in Iraq, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. In the process of supporting these groups and regimes, Iran alienated members of the GCC, other Middle Eastern states and the international community.

In the same year that Ahmadinejad was elected, Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud ascended to the throne in Saudi Arabia. Abdullah, the tenth son of Saudi Arabia's founder, Ibn Saud, became the kingdom's sixth king at the age of 81. Under Abdullah, Saudi Arabia sought to maintain the status quo of a regional power, subsuming much of the power from Iraq post 2003. Saudi Arabia's leaders, the Al Saud family, have long derived much of their legitimacy from Islam, initially through the alliance with the fundamentalist Wahhabi movement, but also through custodianship of the two holy places of Islam, Mecca and Medina. Given the importance of Islam for the Al Saud, the revolution of 1979 in Iran and the establishment of an Islamic Republic would dramatically alter the dynamics of the Persian Gulf, resulting in competition for Islamic supieriority.

Thus, with both states aspiring to leadership over the Islamic world, coupled with perceived Iranian expansionist aspirations, the emergence of competition between the two states on ideological and geopolical grounds appeared a logical outcome. The ideological schism between the two states has manifested itself in the provision of support for groups across the region, wherein Saudi Arabia and Iran have found themselves providing support for opposing sides in conflicts, as seen in

Iraq, Bahrain and Syria. However, relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran have not always been hostile.

Prior to 1979, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran was predominantly characterised by concerns regarding the regional order, wherein both Al Saud and Pahlavi dynasties aspired to control of the Gulf region. Ideological competition within the rivalry stemmed from pre-existing Arab–Persian tensions and a degree of sectarian antagonism rather than fundamental doctrinal religious differences. The relationship was, however, characterised by suspicion between the royal families of the Al Saud and the Pahlavis.[3] This suspicion stemmed predominantly from competition over regional dominance and prior to 1958, was in part due to the involvement of the Hashemites in Baghdad, whose presence complicated relations within the regional order.[4]

Post World War Two, Iran was seen as a close ally of the United States. Writing in 1979, Fred Halliday noted:

> [T]he USA has guaranteed the Iranian regime since 1945 and has, since the late 1960s, been willing to back Iran in its drive for regional dominance by providing most of the diplomatic and military support that Iran has requested. Without US support Iranian foreign policy would not be conceivable in its present form: indeed, it would be impossible.[5]

Halliday suggested that despite a vast wealth, Saudi Arabia was unable to compete for regional power, given the size of Iran's population and military potential.[6] Despite the emergence of ARAMCO (the Arabian American Oil Company) in the early 1930s, strong ties between Riyadh and Washington were not fostered until after World War Two, by which point the United States had both realised the strategic importance of oil and feared the spread of Communism throughout the region.[7] This resulted in the emergence of military ties between Saudi Arabia and the United States,[8] providing Washington with increased influence within the region and Saudi Arabia with the military support to counter the threat posed by Nasser's Egypt.[9] Given ties to both Riyadh and Tehran, combined with space stemming from

the British withdrawal from the Gulf,[10] the United States attempted to foster a "twin pillar" alliance between Saudi Arabia and Iran, although this never achieved formal status.[11]

In the aftermath of the British withdrawal from the Gulf in the 1970s, Iran was presented with an opportunity to assert its dominance over the region, immediately reviving the "historical Persian claim to sovereignty over Bahrain".[12] However, Saudi Arabia was opposed to this idea; indeed, the case of Bahrain is one of the instances where Saudi Arabia and Iran were in disagreement prior to 1979. The issue was resolved, with Iran saving face, by the Shah suggesting that the Bahrainis should be able to determine their own fate, opening the door for a UN mission to discover that the people of Bahrain desired independence.[13]

Despite the areas of competition and friction, including competition within OPEC over oil prices, as Halliday notes, "the Iranians and Saudis, though suspicious of each other had learned to live together".[14] Furthermore, the role of the United States demonstrated the reliance of both Saudi Arabia and Iran on external forces to guarantee their security.[15] The events of 1979 in Iran, however, dramatically changed the nature of both the rivalry and regional security.

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran can be characterised by two areas of competition, namely ideological and geopolitical. The first area of competition is driven by competing identities, in particular, ethno-national and religious identities. Historically, relations between Arab and Persian have been strained, as a consequence of the legacy of both Arab and Persian influence across the region. Religious competition occurs as a consequence of the dominance of Wahhabism[16] within Saudi Arabia, which is often categorised as part of the Sunni sect of Islam and Iran's adherence to the Shi'i sect of Islam. The two major facets of Islam are ideologically opposed to each other, with some holding Sunni and Shi'i doctrines to be incompatible, given Islamic history. The Iranian revolution of 1979 proved cataclysmic for regional security and was followed by a torrent of rhetoric articulating Iran's desired position within the Islamic world. Saudi Arabia was especially vulnerable to this rhetoric, given the importance of Islam within the Kingdom and the Al Saud's desire to control the Islamic world.

Particularly damning was Tehran's postulation that the Al Saud was not a legitimate Islamic dynasty and thus could not be accepted as the guardian of the two holy places of Islam.

The notion of being the guardian of Mecca and Medina is an integral aspect of the Al Saud's legitimacy, both internally and across the Islamic world. As such, the emergence of Iran as a major power within the Islamic world adhering to a diametrically opposed interpretation of Islam offered a further source of entanglement in relations between the two. Furthermore, the Iranian leadership used a large amount of rhetoric against the Al Saud, which had a two-fold effect upon internal stability within Saudi Arabia: firstly, in delegitimising the Al Saud, and secondly, unsettling the Shi'i population within the Kingdom.

Within the second area of competition, Riyadh and Tehran both lay claim to influence over the Persian Gulf region and the wider Middle East. These claims are especially pertinent, given the decline of Iraq as a regional power post 2003. This geopolitical competition is illustrated by a dispute over the name of the body of water separating Saudi Arabia and Iran, denoted the Persian Gulf and Arabian Gulf by Tehran and Riyadh, respectively.[17] Moreover, Tehran perceives that it is uniquely qualified to occupy a position of influence over the region through its belief that Iran is a natural state, derived from the notion that many states throughout the Middle East were created at the whim of colonial powers. The belief that Iran is a natural state is a consequence of Persian history stretching back to approximately 700 BC, and the emergence of organic borders.[18] Additionally, within the geopolitical sphere is an economic rivalry, stemming from Saudi Arabia and Iran's roles as the dominant suppliers of both oil and natural gas, both within the Middle East and the world. This competition has manifested itself within OPEC and has proved to have wide ramifications.

Current Debates

Much has been written on Saudi Arabia and Iran, with debates ranging from foreign policy making to the nature of civil society. While the array of literature is vast, the literature examining the security aspect of the relationship between the two countries is limited[19] and also

employs a narrow conception of security. This book seeks to broaden this conception of security, in particular of the security dilemma. Furthermore, while there exists a deep pool of literature on both Saudi Arabia and Iran that discusses the impact of identity upon each state, the authors do not place the conclusions in the wider context of the relationship between the two countries.

This book considers the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran from an alternate perspective. Much has been written examining the nature of hard power competition across the Middle East, however this work stresses the importance of soft power. In addition, it challenges the notion that states within the Middle East are coherent, unitary actors, suggesting instead that in order to fully understand the behaviour of a state, one must consider the importance of internal dynamics. The internal challenges that a state faces, if severe enough, can result in an internal security dilemma, the resolution of which has the capacity to complicate the external security environment.

The population of Saudi Arabia is around 28 million people (including approximately 5 million expatriate workers). The vast majority of Saudis are Sunni Arabs, although there are a number of Shi'i Muslims, located mainly within the Eastern Province of the country. The main cause of identity incongruence within Saudi Arabia occurs between the state and the Shi'i Muslims within the Eastern Province, although there are also strong tribal tensions. The state of Saudi Arabia was created in 1932 by Ibn Saud, who unified a collection of tribes through a combination of force and ideology, antagonizing numerous tribes who believe their claims of legitimacy of rule over the Arabian Peninsula to be greater than the Al Saud's.

Within the Iranian population of approximately 70 million, Persians account for only half the population. In addition to Persians, there are numerous different ethnic groups, spanning Azerbaijanis, Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, Baluchis and Lors. This has led John Bradley to refer to Iran as a "multinational empire dominated by Persians".[20] The various groups transcend purely ethnic characteristics and include religious groups. Although the vast majority of Iranians subscribe to the Shi'i strand of Islam, there also exist small numbers of Sunni Muslims, Christians and Jews.

In order to fully understand the nuances of the rivalry, and indeed of Middle Eastern security, one needs to have an awareness of the impact of internal dynamics upon external relations between states. To this end, the book is split into seven chapters. The first chapter offers a critical analysis of literature within International Relations and an approach to explore the nature of the rivalry. The second chapter provides a contextual and historical background to the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the post-1979 period, detailing the major events in the relationship and discussing the pressures emanating from both the domestic and international system that shaped the relationship. It does so by separating the rivalry into two spheres: ideological and geopolitical. Chapter three analyses the nature of state formation and the role of narratives in the state-building process, while offering a location of the state in the regional security environment.

Chapters four and five examine the nature of identity incongruence and internal security dilemmas within each state. In doing so, the argument considers identities located within both Saudi Arabia and Iran, with particular focus upon ethnic, tribal and religious identities. Chapters four and five seek to achieve two goals: firstly, presenting those identities existing within Saudi Arabia and Iran; secondly, considering how these identities have impacted upon regime stability. The fourth chapter examines the role of religion within each state, discussing the main religious identities. Chapter five examines the plethora of ethnic and tribal identities, within Iran focussing upon ethnic identities and within Saudi Arabia focussing upon tribal identities. This chapter also considers the impact of irredentism within the region, with an examination of issues stemming from the process of state formation.

Chapter six examines the resolution of internal security dilemmas, with a focus upon the use of narratives. It also explores the manipulation of internal security dilemmas across the region and the implications for regional security. The seventh chapter considers how internal security dilemmas within Saudi Arabia and Iran have led to an external security dilemma driven by soft power. It considers how this external soft power security dilemma guides both the nature of the rivalry and of Middle Eastern security.